

December 24th 5pm service: “Holy Darkness”

Scripture: Isaiah 9: 2-7

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are continuing our Holy Darkness sermon series; a series that is seeking to reset the narrative about darkness in general.

- For typically it has been my experience that the dark in general tends to get a bad wrap.
- For starters, most of the horror movies occur in the dark.
- Not to mention we live in a day where social issues such as racism really highlights that unfortunately skin color matters for some.
- However, I stopped by to suggest on this Christmas Eve that God created both light and dark.
- And although light in scripture is almost always a good thing.
- Throughout scripture, the hope is that we will see that darkness is sometimes holy as well;

- Hopefully we might discover that darkness can be just as beautiful and just as promise filled as the light.
- So this is where I will pitch my sermonic tent on this Christmas Eve this evening;
- My preaching goal is to identify the darkness whether it be literal or metaphorical in our scripture and name those holy moments and opportunities.
- So looking at our Isaiah passage this evening, the prophet names the darkness explicitly in verse 2;
- It reads; ***The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.***
- So I don't know about you, I am already feeling encouraged.
- Because I am not going to lie, this Christmas Eve is probably going to be one of the most difficult Christmases yet.

- For tonight concludes our Advent a season; a time where we relive the story where the people are awaiting the birth of the Messiah, Jesus;
- This season is also a time that invites us all to consider the Second Coming when Christ comes again.
- However, it is difficult to celebrate this Christmas Eve in an empty sanctuary that would be normally filled with hundreds of family members and attendants;
- Even with our lit Advent wreath that our Flower Ministry so lovingly prepared for this occasion; dare I suggest that there is an emotional darkness that I and I would imagine our worship team is experiencing.
- It is even tempting to think that Jesus has decided not to make an appearance this year in any form for like you, I just knew that this pandemic darkness that we have been in would be over by now!
- Not to mention Christmas Eve is one of the busiest and most exciting times in the Christian calendar for many churches.
- Now, it feels well just dark.

- **Last year I am reflecting on how chaotic and exhilarating my first Christmas Eve as your spiritual leader was.**
- I felt darkness then, but a different kind of darkness than from today;
- There was a darkness within me as to whether my leadership would be able to pull off three Christmas Eve services.
- I felt so relieved that we did so, and did it relatively well.
- In all of this reflection though, I am remembering a phrase that my former Bishop, Scott Jones of the Kansas West Conference would say during every Christmas season.
- He would say, to “remember the reason for the season.”
- This was literally the only message of guidance he would give to us church leaders; to remember the reason for the season.
- Sort of like the advice that I am certain our Israelite community may have been given during their years of oppression and wilderness and darkest moments;

- To remember the God who has seen them through their darkest journey; from slavery into a land filled with promise and opportunity.
- Reflecting on our church during Christmas Eve again this time last year;
- I will reiterate that we had three fantastic Christmas services considering it was a first for me and our worship team;
- But if I am honest with you this evening....I am not sure if I had the Bishop's words before me as I do now.
- **I remember** worrying a lot about having the right music in all three services;
- **I remember** navigating through very intense and stressful conversations regarding the impending success of these three services....
- **I remember** having tons of conversations assuring people that we would make sure that we had every tradition as before or similar enough;
- But I am ashamed to say that I do not remember recalling these words then; "remember the reason for the season."

- For although we sung Silent Night as the sanctuary got darker and darker this time last year.
- **And although** we were very much together; face to face; that was the best part;
- Not to mention seeing all of the beautiful children/youth and babies was a tremendous treat!
- **And although** the candlelight that came afterwards as we will do tonight was really magical;
- I realize today that those words from my former Bishop still did not rise within me.
- I was celebrating that we had completed those three services....that was basically all.
- So now here we are today,
- And ironically the things that needed to be considered last year felt differently this year.
- It felt less chaotic.
- People that I talked to expressed that they were more than understanding as to why we had to go online only.
- People expressed that they were just grateful to have a service to watch; nothing more, nothing less.

- And somehow in this darkness that we have been experiencing for 10 months or a little more as it pertains to this virus;
- I find myself recalling the words; remember the reason for the season.
- I recall, myself as the Israelites was being prophesied in our passage but is now a reality for us that; a child was born.
- The pandemic does not change this fact.
- Having service online only does not change this fact.
- That **a child was born**, whether this is the Christmas Eve you and I hoped for or not;
- **A child was born** to show the people a way through their oppression and pain;
- **A child was born** in the darkness not reveal that this is when God's activity is at it's finest;
- In the stillness of the night;
- When time seems to slow down for humanity or at least feel differently from the hustle and bustle that the day brings.....
- **A child was born church....**

- And yes Many other children had been born, and other sons had been given, but this One was special, and different from all the rest;
- For this child would grow to be the **Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Lord, Prince of Peace.**
- This would be the child that showed the world then and now, how great things can come from darkness;
- That perhaps God even chose the darkness, just to reveal to humanity how a person in the darkness might navigate;
- Not with a sense of fear and trepidation;
- But with a sense of anticipation for what is to come; so that when daytime comes again;
- So that in our case when Christmas Eve comes again;
- We might understand and cherish the reason for the season a little more;
- For the darkness has taught us so much.
- Let the Church say Amen!

December 24th 7pm service: “Holy Darkness”

Scripture: Luke 2: 1-20

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are continuing our Holy Darkness sermon series; a series that is seeking to reset the narrative about darkness in general.

- For typically it has been my experience that the dark in general tends to get a bad wrap.
- For starters, most of the horror movies occur in the dark.
- Not to mention we live in a day where social issues such as racism really highlights that unfortunately skin color matters for some.
- However, I stopped by to suggest on this Christmas Eve that God created both light and dark.
- And although light in scripture is almost always a good thing.

- Throughout scripture, the hope is that we will see that darkness is sometimes holy as well;
- Hopefully we might discover that darkness can be just as beautiful and just as promise filled as the light.
- So this is where I will pitch my sermonic tent on this Christmas Eve this evening;
- My preaching goal is to identify the darkness whether it be literal or metaphorical in our scripture and name those holy moments and opportunities.
- So in our gospel today, Luke always tends to write as a historian.
- This fact is evident again (cf. 1:5) in the first verse here. He mentions both the Roman emperor and the ruling governor of Syria.
- Caesar Augustus reigned 30 b.c.–a.d. 14. Both parts of this ruler's name are titles. **Caesar** is from the same root as Czar and Kaiser.
- **Augustus** means “reverend,” a title assumed by the Roman emperors.

- Caesar Augustus was one of the greatest rulers the world has ever seen, reigning as absolute monarch over the Roman Empire for forty-four years and maintaining order and peace. This helped to prepare the way for the rapid spread of Christianity.
- Now where you and I can see the literal darkness named in this passage is vs 8 where the Word tells us that Christ was born in the night.
- And although it is our tradition to sing Silent Night with candlelight during Christmas Eve, I stopped by to suggest that this was not a silent night that Christ was born in at all.
- For the Word tells us that Mary wrapped her baby in **swaddling clothes**, or swathing bands.
- It appears that Mary had no midwife to help and so had to perform this task herself.
- Then the Word tells us that Mary **laid him in a manger**.
- Tradition says this was in a cave stable in the hillside. **Because there was no room for them in the inn.**

- Applying all of this to wear we are today;
- This is not feeling like a serene Silent Night either from my perspective.
- For the emotional darkness that I and I would suspect you might be feeling in many regards is the darkness of isolation.
- To not be able to be face to face with one another in community;
- For some of us, not to be able to be together with family;
- Well I would imagine for many of us.... it feels dark....
- I would imagine that for many of us...it feels lonely.
- And although personally our church has adapted quite well through these 10 or more months; this Holiday season of Advent feels at least from my perspective....vacant.
- But even in these feelings we may be experiencing, I don't know about you, but I am seeing the conditions that Jesus was born in quite differently this year.

- I mean before, I knew that Jesus was born in the night,
- **And I knew** that it was chaotic,
- **And I knew** that the conditions of the world from a social perspective were not good to say the least;
- **And I knew** that the conditions that Jesus was born in was not ideal;
- But to be honest, as I say this, I acknowledge that I never really lived Christ story until now.
- **I never really thought** about how adaptive Mary and Joseph had to be;
- **I never really thought** about how flexible they would need to be;
- Until living through some of the darkest times this world has ever experienced;
- Where history keeps repeating itself over and over again as it pertains to race relations and the pandemic crisis we all are experiencing;

- Having experienced this all and more, I believe the as a whole, we all may be connected to the birth of Jesus like never before;
- For now we thoroughly understand what uncertainty on a global level feels like;
- **Now we** may be beginning to understand the impact of marginalization and oppression because the world has slowed down just enough where we can no longer dismiss that these things are here
- **Now we** all may be able to identify and relate to just how resilient Mary and Joseph had to be, in a world that needs economic relief like yesterday;
- **Now we** may be able to fully understand what it feels like to have no room to lay our heads as many of the world is facing eviction and foreclosures;
- **Now we** may be able to see why God chose for God's Son to be born in the darkness;
- **A dark time** where oppression split their world almost in two as well;

- **A dark time** where people needed to be shown the way; for they still couldn't seem to grasp the full blessings of the promised land flowing with milk and honey on their own;
- And even in all of this, we see how holy darkness can really be;
- For this darkness did not stop the child from being born;
- It only magnified the prophecy of Isaiah 9: 2 in which I will paraphrase for such a times as this;
- ***That although the people walked in the darkness; they have seen a great light; Although they lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.***
- Let the Church Say Amen!